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ABSTRACT

Many basic writers who possess minimal composition skills are able to articulate their thoughts but are unable to express these thoughts on paper. The talk-write method of writing rehearsal is an approach that allows these students to experience prewriting and composition processes in an enjoyable way. In the talk-write technique, the student first discusses all thoughts on a topic and these are tape recorded. In the second phase, the student listens to the recording for possible theses. In the third phase, the student talks through various ideas with a definite focus, then writes them down with supporting points. The student presents this outline to others for feedback on organization and content in the optional fourth phase. The fifth phase is the writing of the rough draft. Finally, revision of the draft can be done orally for further feedback and editing. This talk-write technique can be adapted to different classroom situations, such as working with partners, with the teacher, in groups, or alone. This rehearsal strategy is advantageous in that it illuminates composition as a process and the emphasis lies in the collaborative process. This technique also makes the writing process less threatening by making it a social encounter. (HTH)

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Speaking Your Writing:

A Rehearsal Technique for the Basic Writing Student

In his article, "Write Before Writing," Donald Murray introduces the concept of rehearsal for writing, suggesting that pre-writing is an integral aspect of the writing process, one which precedes a first draft.[1] In most classrooms, the rehearsal technique for writing is, simply, writing. Students put words on paper via outlines, writing through a draft, or freewriting. These techniques are certainly helpful for many writers; however, rehearsing through writing simply does not work for all students, particularly for non-traditional students coming out of an oral culture. What we are proposing here is that for many students, the most effective way into the writing process will be the primary language activity: speaking.

Basic writers, students who possess minimal composition skills, are able to articulate their thoughts; however, they are unable to express these thoughts on paper. Unfamiliar with the process of composition, these students become mired in the early stages of writing. Facing the blank page, they often experience difficulty translating to the written mode ideas and feelings which they may easily express in the oral mode. Even when they are able to commit their ideas to paper, beginning writers experience difficulty in developing and organizing their thoughts in a logical and coherent manner.

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Teachers of basic writing students face the overriding question: How can these writers experience the composition process, especially pre-writing, in a way which is supportive, interesting, and challenging? An answer lies in the student's oral tradition of communication. Composition courses, to be successful, "must be designed to extend rather than to alter the linguistic resources that the student brings with him [sic] to the classroom. The highly verbal culture of the peer group needs to be drawn upon as at least a first stage in the writing process."[2]

The purpose of this article is (1) to offer theoretical information about the talk-write approach and to explicate our own speak-write model, (2) to provide a variety of learning strategies to implement the speak-write rehearsal model, and (3) to suggest reasons for using the speak-write model as a rehearsal technique for writing.

Theoretical Talk-Write Rehearsal Models

The first section of the paper addresses the question: What is the talk-write approach as a rehearsal technique for writing? The concept of rehearsal is certainly not new to any one in theater. One rehearses--practices--for the theatrical performance. However, the concepts of rehearsal and performance may well be new to teachers of composition. The notion of rehearsal suggests the preparation over time in which an actor or writer comes to understand the material at hand. An actor may paraphrase, question, and speak the lines of the text, attempting to fully develop a character; similarly, a writer may talk through ideas about a topic and ask questions to fully develop a thesis. In both cases, the rehearsal technique stresses speaking as a way to formulate ideas. The final performance results in communication with an audience. Actors perform their parts orally before people actually present, whereas writers perform on paper usually for an implicit audience of readers.

The talk-write model builds upon the conception of inner speech set forth by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky has posited that as we mature speech moves "inward," so that inner speech becomes a kind of thinking to oneself. Not all students, however, are able to handle silent dialoguing with self as a way into writing. Whether because of personal learning style or because some facet of thinking lies undeveloped in them, these people need the comfort zone of external speech.

Various composition scholars have advocated theoretical talk-write approaches. Noteworthy among these is Robert Zoellner, who first proposed a theoretical "talk-write" model (College English, 30 [1969], 267-320). Zoellner observes that students frequently are able to say what they cannot write. He, therefore, urges composition teachers to exploit the student's vocal as well as scribal verbal repertory. By using overt speech utterances, Zoellner believes, students can improve their writing ability. Zoellner outlines a theoretical model based on principles of operant conditioning to stimulate students to talk through what they can not write.

Terry Radcliffe offers a more concrete talk-write model which is built upon Zoellner's proposition.[3] Believing that teachers need to move away from traditional models of writing instruction, Radcliffe enumerates many advantages of the "talk-write" model over "think-write" and "read-write" models. Such advantages include the production of more words, phrases, and sentences per unit of time than in writing, production of more units of ideas per unit of time, and the production of more total words per unit of time than writing. Radcliffe considers oral communication to be more natural, more easily acquired, and more often utilized than writing. According to Radcliffe, there appears to be ample support for the talk-write model.

To motivate students to talk out their ideas, Radcliffe suggests a social situation in which two people interact with one another. One person

provides socially rewarding and information seeking cues, thereby eliciting and maintaining speech communication from the other person. Radcliffe recommends that negative criticism and evaluation be withheld during the transaction.

To complete the talk-write model, Radcliffe proposes (1) a means of storing the subject's oral discourse and (2) a means of transferring the subject's speaking to writing. For the first procedure, a tape recorder is used to capture and store the subject's discourse. The subject then listens to the tape and transfers the speech to paper. Radcliffe acknowledges that the transfer cannot be a word-for-word transcription. Rather, the subject listens to the tape, selects the best ideas on the topic, and applies the basic rules of composition in order to transcribe the oral discourse.

Readers familiar with the current literature on conferences might wonder how the talk-write approach relates to conferencing. There is, admittedly, overlap between the two approaches. Both rely on conversation to initiate, organize, and reformulate ideas. Indeed, the rationale and values of a talk-write approach lay the theoretical groundwork for conferences. Those who have seen the remarkable benefits of conferences with their own students can attest to the value of such an approach in improving student attitudes and student writing. But perhaps the mistake is made of attributing those benefits purely to the one-on-one situation. More than that, the benefits can be attributable to the energy and power of dialogue, the spoken word, in freeing students to write better. Students are able to relate to another person in a way that is more comfortable and more practiced. Having "thought out loud" with another, they can then move to translate that language activity to their less practiced, less comfortable one: writing.

There are distinctions between the two procedures. First, conferencing

follows the student through all phases of the composition process. Although conferences may begin with pre-writing discussions, subsequent meetings deal with first drafts and revisions. In contrast, the talk-write model focuses primarily on the pre-writing stage. This approach attempts to lessen the student's writing anxiety before any writing takes place. Second, conferences rely on the student's written drafts to record information. The talk-write model requires a tape recorder to capture the student's ideas. The initial focus, therefore, is on the spoken and not the written word. Third, conferences rely on teacher-student interaction. The talk-write model, as we later demonstrate, may be adapted for a variety of learning experiences. Having distinguished between the two approaches, it is evident that the talk-write model may be easily incorporated into the early phase of conferencing, but before this is possible, the rehearsal technique must be made explicit.

Description of Our Speak-Write Rehearsal Model

To differentiate this model from previous talk-write methods, we employ the term "speak-write." Our speak-write model is based on Radcliffe's talk-write model; however, we offer a procedure which is more practical, concrete, and systematic than the preceding talk-write approaches. Drawing on our expertise in speech communication and composition, we propose the following steps to the speak-write rehearsal model:

(1) Tape Recording the Initial Meeting: Talking It Out

The first phase of the speak-write process values the student's experience of the topic. After the student or teacher initiates a topic, the student discusses all thoughts and feelings which are triggered by the subject. When required to write about the ideas and emotions which pass through their consciousness, students may lose their train of thoughts, may

be unable to translate their thoughts to paper, or may become bogged down in the mechanics of writing rather than concentrating on the subject-experience. An oral approach seems better suited to capture the spontaneous reactions to the subject under consideration. The students are able to move through a variety of thoughts quickly. During this brainstorming phase, the student explores as many dimensions of the topic as possible. Students are encouraged to generate ideas without censorship or premature evaluation.

(2) Discussing the Initial Meeting: Finding a Thesis

The second phase of the speak-write process involves narrowing the student's elaborations on the topic. By playing back the tape recording, the student can list possible theses for the paper. When reviewing the list, the student should ask these questions: (1) What do I already know about this specific topic? (2) Does the subject and its variations interest me? (3) How might this subject interest an audience? At this point, a tentative thesis statement can be formulated. The first two phases of the speak-write process take place during a fifteen to twenty minute meeting.

(3) Tape-recording the Second Meeting: Organizing and Exploring Ideas

The third phase seeks to elaborate upon and organize ideas which relate to the specific thesis statement. With a definite focus on the subject area, the students talk through various ideas. After this discussion, the students may play back the recording. The student selects three or four main ideas and writes them down in sentence form. Under each main idea, the student searches for supporting points and writes them down. The student now has a rough outline for an oral or written presentation. The significance of this stage of the speak-write rehearsal model cannot be overemphasized. Basic writing students discover that they can choose major themes from their own discourse and organize ideas into a logical order of progression. The

composition process is demystified as students develop organizational skills central to writing and speaking.

(4) Presenting the Paper: Recognizing the Audience

The fourth phase, an optional step, entails giving a short oral presentation to others from the outline. By presenting their ideas to others, the students obtain feedback on the content and organization of the paper. The speakers may ask their colleagues to paraphrase the theme of the speech and to list the main ideas. If the audience is unable to do these tasks, the speaker will be asked to work on a clearer purpose statement, more exact topic sentences, or more coherent transitions. Questions from the audience may help to clarify these and other problem areas. By speaking their writing, students become more aware of their audience--the listeners and readers of their papers. Just as speakers must cogently present their ideas to an audience, so too must writers compose ideas logically and coherently for their audience.

(5) Writing the First Draft

The fifth phase requires the student to write the first draft of the paper. Utilizing the feedback obtained in stage four and the material generated in the earlier stages, the student is ready to write the first draft of the paper.

It should be stressed that the rehearsal process is not a substitute for instructive lessons concerning sentences, paragraphs, and diction. The speak-write model focuses on generating ideas (content) and ordering the material (organization). Students are still expected to learn and apply the conventions of writing and must not be led to believe that transcribing their verbal responses is in itself sufficient. The application of these conventions will come in revising and editing stages, not in the rehearsal or prewriting stages.

(6) Revising the First Draft

Oral communication can be useful in the revision process as it is in the rehearsal stage. The student may begin by reading the composition aloud to a partner or a group. The speakers and their partners listen for organizational flaws such as unclear development of ideas, obscure main points, weak transitions, little or no supporting evidence. By talking with another person or a group, the students may then analyze, restate, and refocus their ideas for the next draft. In his article "Intimacy and the Audience: The Relationship Between Revision and the Social Dimension of Peer Tutoring" (College English, 42 [1980], 64), Thom Hawkins explains that a vital link in the writing process is "the opportunity to use oral language in discursive intellectual discourse, and that such discourse helps teach students the skills and judgement necessary to revise."

Students can also address other editing concerns. In his article "Why Leroy Can't Write" (College English, 39 [1978], 852-859), Joseph Collignon suggests that students reading their papers aloud can hear the sound of their punctuation mistakes. He asserts that students also see and hear the words simultaneously; therefore, they may even correct spelling errors. Using speaking as a rehearsal technique for writing, to generate and organize ideas, and, later, as a revising and editing technique, aids in accomplishing the main objectives of composition instruction.

Variations on the Speak-Write Model

The second section of the paper addresses the question: How can the speak-write model be tailored to the needs of individual students? Various speak-write strategies are offered here because students have different approaches to learning. Some students work best in a one-to-one setting; others prefer small group interaction; some students work best relating to

and taking guidance from persons in authority, while others enjoy an equal relationship. On occasion, a student may prefer and be capable of working individually. Whichever strategy is employed, audiotape recordings provide the means for referring to the oral discourse. The following strategies for implementing the speak-write rehearsal model are geared to meeting the cognitive learning styles of different students.

(1) Working with Partners or Peer Tutors

Instruct the students to work in pairs with a tape recorder. When students work with a partner, they help each other draw out information on the subject. Taking turns, the students may ask questions, or they may offer suggestions. A related strategy is to train peer tutors to bring out the other's ideas. Several styles of communication are presented which offer support, elicit information and ask for clarification. When the students are able to verbalize their ideas easily, the other person can offer supportive statements: "I understand," "Mmm," Yeah." A sample dialogue serves to illustrate the process:

Partner 1: There are so many ways to talk about "My Neighborhood."

Partner 2: Sounds like you have a lot to say.

Other statements may invite students to continue or expand their thoughts and feelings. These "door openers" include expressions such as "Tell me about it' or "I'd like to hear more about that." The example continues:

Partner 1: Maybe I could describe what my neighborhood looks like.

Partner 2: That sounds interesting. Go ahead.

Open-ended questions may aid the students in providing supporting material. Such questions begin with what, how, and why. Again,

Partner 1: My neighborhood is too noisy!

Partner 2: What kinds of noises are there?

In addition, partners may use a mirroring technique by repeating the ideas

which they have heard the student utter.

Partner 1: I really hate where I live.

Partner 2: You really dislike it? How's that?

Partner 1: Yeah. The buildings are run down, it's noisy, and it's too far away from everything.

Such active listening techniques allow students to hear what they have said and to discover whether or not that was in reality the idea they had in mind.

(2) Working with the Teacher

The teacher may wish to work with the student. By using this strategy, the teacher can assist the student and also serve as a model for peer tutors. Students selected to instruct other students individually observe the teacher and student working together and learn from the teacher's behavior. The teacher raises appropriate questions about the topic and encourages the student to make decisions about the content and organization of material. The teacher not only seeks information but also reinforces the student's choices. This strategy is especially helpful for students who require special attention and affirmation. Noteworthy here is the role taken by student and teacher in the dialogue. If the interaction is viewed as a conversation between co-learners or equals, as suggested by Mina Shaughnessy in Error and Expectations. students will feel more comfortable discussing ideas.[4] Susanne El Jacobs and Adela B. Darliner, in "Helping Writers to Think" (College English, 38 [1977], 489-505), indicate that roles may shift necessarily from authority figure to co-learner, depending on the needs of the individual student at the time. Attention to individual needs is urged.

(3) Working in Groups

Instruct students to work in groups. This strategy allows each student the opportunity to express ideas about the topic. In working together, students may stimulate new thoughts. When several ideas are expressed, the

number of possibilities becomes evident. The group members may raise questions. Some questions are asked for clarification and insight, thus stimulating the students to examine their ideas in greater detail. Questions are also asked to solve problems. Brainstorming generates new possibilities. Disinterest and mental blocks are rattled by confrontation; valued conceptions gain support and encouragement. Richard Gebhardt in "Teamwork and Feedback: Broadening the Base of Collaborative Writing" (College English, 42 [1980], 74), states that

> "broadening the range of problems upon which collaborative writing works is important, since this can help de-isolate students and give them moral support, as well as bring them wider points of view, throughout the writing process."

There are several variations to this collaborative strategy. Each person in the group may have the same topic or themes related to the same topic. The students may be assigned topics on unrelated subjects. Another idea is to have each group compose one joint paper. The single paper then emerges through a dialogue with several participants. After the students have a feel for the speak-write process, they may become more confident working alone.

(4) Working Alone

Some students may prefer to work alone with the tape recorder. This strategy focuses on the student's dialogue with self. Students who wish to work individually should meet certain prerequisites. They should be able to articulate their thoughts without coaching from others. They should also have the ability to listen to their tape recordings and to organize their material into a logical form. As students become adept at the composition process, they may feel more confident in working individually and less threatened by asking others to help them talk through their writing problems. Furthermore, students who work well individually and who have mastered the

speak-write approach may be trained as peer tutors. This learning strategy is a way to bolster the writer's self-image; i.e., the ability to accomplish a task successfully by oneself.

Each of these learning strategies which implements the speak-write rehearsal model gradually moves students from speaking to writing. In a one-on-one or group situations in the classroom or lab, students talk out their ideas with others in preparation for writing. Using oral communication with others, students generate ideas, organize their thoughts, and articulate them in a clear, understandable fashion. As they understand what they want to say and how they want to say it, the students write down major ideas, complete an outline, and develop a rough draft. By reading their papers aloud and discussing their ideas with others, they edit and revise their written assignments.

Advantages of Using Speaking as a Rehearsal Strategy

The final section of this paper addresses the question: What are the values of the speak-write model as a rehearsal technique for writing? First, the systematic procedure illuminates composition as a process. Although the speaking and writing interchange requires a period of time, novice writers begin to understand the step-by-step course which leads to the final paper. The emphasis lies not only in the written product but in the collaborative process by which the paper emerges. Second, the speak-write process is enjoyable and less threatening because students work together to achieve common goals. No longer is writing a lonely task which they must perform closeted away in their own rooms; rather, it becomes a social encounter. Through dialogue, the possibilities for generating more ideas and supporting details are multiplied. Energy becomes synergistic. Instead of a work-oriented project, it becomes an exploratory and creative experience. Time passes

more quickly; students can be heard to marvel that "this is fun." Third, the speak-write approach underscores the concept of audience. Students, through oral presentations of their written material, experience the discourse (oral and written) as a shared event. The emphasis of the composing process is in communicating with others. By engaging the participation of others, not only the preparation process but also the audience-reader becomes less intimidating and restricting. The audience opens up rather than closes off possibilities. Fourth, the speak-write model is flexible. The procedure may be implemented in a variety of ways. The students may work with other students, in dyadic or group situations, with the teacher, or alone. The value of the model's flexibility is twofold. The students may select the strategy which aids them more in learning how to write. On the other hand, teachers may use different strategies for instructional variety.

Students benefit in numerous ways from the speak-write approach. First, students develop organizational skills fundamental to communication. They learn to select main ideas and supporting statements from their oral discourse and order the material in a logical manner. In their writing and speaking, students are able to express and support their points of view. Second, students improve not only their writing skills but also their speaking and listening skills. Working together, they listen actively and then ask questions for information and clarification. Each person must answer the questions to the satisfaction of the other person. Asking and answering questions have been identified as basic speech communication skills. Finally, this approach bolsters the basic writer's self-image. Many students have not had much success in the educational system. In this instance, the student's own personal experience is held in esteem. As they learn to freely express themselves, the students make their own choices regarding content and organization. The students begin to feel better about themselves and their ability to write.

Two key points remain to be emphasized. One, speaking is an effective means of getting writing going--of rehearsing for writing. Two, as teachers we need to help writers to discover the rehearsal methods which work best for each student. By using speech communication activities, we can help students in the pre-writing stage of the writing process and can thus help them to improve their writing skills.

Notes

[1] Donald M. Murray, "Write Before Writing," College Composition and Communication, 19 (1978), 375-381.

[2] R. W. Bailey, "Write Off Versus Write On," in Varieties of Present-Day English, ed. Richard W. Bailey and Joy L. Robinson, New York (The Macmillan Co., 1973), pp. 384-409.

[3] Terry Radcliffe, "Talk-Write Composition: A Theoretical Model Proposing the Use of Speech to Improve Writing," Research in the Teaching of English, 6 (1972), 187-199.

[4] Mina Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations, New York (Oxford University Press: 1977).